

The Renunciation at Cloven Hoof

BY ELMORE ELLIOTT PEAKE

THE girl's skirts were looped up, and the swift mountain water, tempted to momentary dalliance, gurgled about her white knees—for in that sequestered glen there was none but the wood-thrush and the nodding columbine to see. One small tanned hand grasped a light rod; the other one, clenched, was pressed against her heart; and her dark eyes glowed expectantly as she rapidly cast her home-made fly into a promising black pool under the farther bank.

Just as a sudden swirl broke the smooth surface, and the slender hickory almost doubled upon itself, an invisible thing clipped through the underbrush and smacked viciously against a near-by tree, followed by the report of a rifle from somewhere up the flank of the glen. The invisible thing was a bullet. The fair angler, however, coolly landed her fish, regardless both of this incident and of a misstep which sent the icy water racing up her leg to the very limit of the unclothed zone. Then she sang out musically, without anger or alarm: "Look out where you're a-shootin'!" But her bower having been invaded, her sport was over; so, stepping gingerly ashore over the slippery stones, she quickly pulled on her shoes and stockings, and lowered her dress to its normal position.

As she drew a string of glistening trout from the water, a young fellow, with hat stuck swaggeringly on the back of his head and a rifle in the hollow of his arm, emerged from the alders on the opposite side of the stream. For a moment he eyed the girl's catch admiringly, even enviously.

"You didn't say nothin' yest'day about goin' a-fishin', Johnny," he began, in an aggrieved tone.

"I didn't say I *wasn't* goin'," she answered.

"I 'lowed you'd tell me if you was."

"You 'lowed wrong, Bud," she retorted; then added, less sharply, "I ketch more when I go alone."

She crossed the stream, fearlessly, on a prostrate tree, and the pair started up the steep declivity, side by side. No physical inferiority was apparent in the woman. In fact, she set the pace, and with such ease and suppleness that the thick plait of hair hanging down her back scarcely swung out of position.

Neither spoke during the ascent, when breath was at a premium. But on reaching the top the wild young fellow, without the slightest warning, encircled the girl's neck with his free arm and roughly kissed her on the lips. She made no struggle, strong and active as she was, for she had been securely trapped; and when her captor released her, she displayed none of the feigned indignation of the flirt. She simply faced the youth with a peculiar shimmering luminosity in her big, expressive eyes, which might have been anger, or might have been only a secret admiration of his unspeakable audacity.

"Bud Turner, if dad knew that you'd kissed me he'd about kill you," she said, calmly.

"I reckon he won't know it," returned Bud, coolly breaking off a sassafras tip to chew.

"He will if I tell."

"I reckon you won't tell, Johnny."

The girl, as wild and lovely as any wood-nymph, and not as immature as one who had seen her only in the trout-stream would have imagined, still held her inscrutable eyes upon the offender. But quickly her lashes fell. Masculinity—red-headed and freckle-faced though it was, and out at elbows and knees—had prevailed.

Shortly after reaching the main trail of the Pass, Bud turned into a bark-peelers' road. Johnny pursued her homeward way—but slowly, with thoughtful,



Drawn by Lucius Wolcott Hitchcock

Half-tone plate engraved by G. F. Smith

ONE SMALL TANNED HAND GRASPED A LIGHT ROD

half-troubled eyes. It was the first time that any man, save her father, had ever kissed her; though, to be sure, a few men had tried to kiss her before. Oddly enough, she had had a premonition, as she climbed out of the glen, that Bud meant mischief. Why, then, had she allowed herself to fall such an easy prey? Why had she not been angrier? And why did her heart still flutter in that strange way?

Blueford Haynes's little store, the only human habitation in Cloven Hoof Pass, perched on the highest point of this elevated link between East and West. From its front porch one could overlook in either direction many a township in the fertile lands below, where hamlets and villages were scattered about like a child's blocks upon a nursery floor.

On this porch sat Blueford now. He was a man of elephantine proportions, and trusted his weight only to a rocking-chair of special size and strength. As he dozed, with his fat hands clasped over his great paunch, and his flabby neck overflowing the collar of his flannel shirt, he seemed an embodiment of the Spirit of Rest. A sluggard, a gormand, a deserter from the army of civilization, a traitor to the traditions of his family—all these he undoubtedly was. Yet he had a brow that a statesman might have envied; for what ten or twenty generations have built up, with infinite pains, it lies not in the power of one generation wholly to tear down. And when he roused at the clatter of his daughter's fish-pole upon the floor, there was an echo in his voice—blurred though it was by his slovenly, colloquial speech—of the mellow, silvery tones which in his father's day had so often thrilled the galleries of the Old Dominion's legislative hall. He did not speak, however, until Johnny had dropped upon his lap and kissed him.

"Honey, Jap Brouters brought me a letter this mornin' from that academy we wrote to."

His tone was the circumspect one with which people introduce a delicate or unwelcome subject, and he fumbled a due time in his capacious pockets before producing the communication in question. But he had no sooner done so than the girl, with the swiftness of a sparrow-

hawk, pounced upon it, flung it into the grass, and then smothered his protestations with her laughing lips.

"Go and git it now, baby," he begged, when she finally permitted him to speak.

"Git what?"

"That letter. Go on now."

"What letter?"

"Pshaw, baby! Quit your teasin' me."

"Teasin' *who*?"

He knew how she quailed under the thought of going away to school—she who had never spent a night twenty yards from his side; and her pretty nonsense play brought to his mind a poor sick puppy which he had once tried to shoot, but which, whenever he raised his gun, leaped upon him and licked his hands, until his heart sickened of its fell purpose. Would it fail him again?

"The principal says," he began, adjusting his spectacles, after Johnny had finally rescued the letter, "that she'll be glad to take any one that Miss Holly recommends. It costs nine dollars a week. That includes board, washin', and tuition. Last year there was a hundred and fifty girls there—more girls than you could scrape up in this whole county—and next year there'll be two hundred. The course is elective—choose what you want, you know—and includes all the branches commonly taught in institutions of learning devoted exclusively to young ladies."

Thus, half reading, half paraphrasing, he went through the typewritten page. Johnny, with her hands clasped about one knee, listened with set mouth.

"Dad," said she, finally, "I wish that Miss Holly nor no other missionary teacher had ever come into this here mountain."

"Pshaw, baby! I reckon I'd sent you away to school anyhow—in time."

"You never would. You never would 'a' thought of it. How fur is it down there, dad?"

"Well, clost to a hundred and fifty miles. But that ain't fur by rail. You ain't been on a railroad train yet."

"It's fur enough," observed the girl, dubiously. "Dad, do you really, truly want me to go? Or air you just sayin' it because that Miss Holly put you up to it?" She eyed him suspiciously.

"Why, honey, I want you to be a lady."

"Can't I be one 'thout goin' away to school?"

"Not hardly."

She toyed with the top button of his vest for a season.

"After I've made a lady of myself, what 'll I do? Come back here and help run the store agin?"

The irony was wholly unconscious, but it struck home; for Blueford had asked himself that same question.

"That's lookin' a good ways ahead," he answered, evasively. "It will take you four years to go through the academy. By that time, I reckon, we won't be livin' here."

"Where will we be livin'?"

Blueford moved uneasily. To be pinned down to definiteness, either as to time or place, was always a painful operation to him.

"Oh, in some nice little town somewhere."

"Why couldn't we go back to Virginia, where all our folks live?"

"Well, dearie, we been away so long that I don't seem to think of 'em any more as *our* folks." He slipped his big arm about her yielding, uncorseted waist.

"I reckon I hadn't ought to tell you, but I don't know as any of our folks would be prostrated with joy to see me pokin' in there agin."

"Why?" she demanded, hotly.

"They're rich and we're poor, fur one thing. They probably call me a failure."

Johnny gave him an impulsive kiss.

"Then I don't want you to go back. But why couldn't we move to Marysville? Then I could live with you all the time I went to school."

Blueford removed his glasses and mopped his big face, although the pure

mountain air was by no means oppressive. How could he be expected to confess to this idolator of himself that he was only a coward who had been ordered back from the world's firing-line?

"I kin make more money here, baby—



SECURELY TRAPPED

and it will take a powerful lot of money to keep you in school, countin' books and clothes."

"More money than it's worth, I guess," said Johnny, sagely. "Well, I got fish to fry. Want your'n in cracker crumbs, I suppose. Daddy, who'll fry your fish when I'm gone? Who'll *hetch* 'em fur you?"

Who, indeed! She was only a motherless pink morsel of humanity when he brought her to this place, and for eight years thereafter she had been his constant care. But now, for eight years



"PSHAW, BABY! QUIT YOUR TEASIN' ME"

and over, she had taken care of him, cooking, sweeping, washing, waiting on customers, laying out her father's clean shirts, tying his cravats—on the rare occasions that he indulged in such finery—and even brushing his hair when she wanted him to look particularly nice. To lose her was like losing his right arm—yea, and his heart as well.

But, he reflected sadly, all that Miss Holly had said was true. This wilderness was no place for a young woman like Johnny. She had been as happy and care-free as any young wild thing of the woods. But already Blueford had

noted a change. Mysterious movements in the deeps of her nature were taking place; mating-time would soon be nigh. The father might still call her his baby, but in truth she was a fair and delectable woman—a prize which was sure to catch the eye of some aspiring mountaineer. She would marry. But she was not made of the passive clay of the mountain women, who had been content for generations to drudge, eat and sleep, minister to the pleasure of their lords, bear a flock of children, and at the end lie down and die and be buried like an old horse in some convenient fence-corner. No. Eventually the

blood of her ancestors would cry out for its own. Then something would happen.

For some weeks now Blueford had pondered these things, slowly and heavily, after the habit of his brain, and had finally reached a resolution. His girl, potentially a lady by reason of her blood, must be a lady in fact. She must rehabilitate the fallen glory of his branch of the family. She had the beauty and the intellect to do it. All she lacked was education and ambition. The first he could give her, and from this the second would naturally spring.

But he had reached this resolution only through a travail of spirit that had made him clench his great hands; for, to say nothing of the four desolate years without her presence, he realized that the measure of her approach to the goal he had set for her would be the measure of her recession from him. She would be home during summer vacations, to be sure; and he knew how eagerly she would hasten back to the blessed associations of her childhood—to her own cozy little room; to the kitchen, with its puncheon floor and log walls; the clump of old apple-trees and the knee-deep grass beneath; the spring-house and its bed of mint, of which she used to bring him a crisp handful every morning for his julep; the glen, with its stream, trout, and shy wild flowers; Indian Cave, from whose gloomy mouth she used to fly in terror, fancying that she had seen a red warrior still lurking there.

But, alas! something would be missing. The old relation could not be reestablished, and she would learn that no conjuring can restore the magic past. In a few days her mind would revert to the interests of her new world. Comparisons would inevitably follow; and, judged by the standards she would by that time have acquired, this old world of hers would appear tame and crude. And her father—his faith was strong that she would always love him, but he knew that never again could he loom on her horizon as the majestic and impeccable figure he had been in the past. Because, forsooth, he was not majestic or impeccable.

So, in the summer days that followed, with their crisp mornings, cloudless noons, and dewless nights, Blueford's heart often sank within him. But this

giving up of his child was the first great sacrifice of his life, the first great enterprise he had ever attempted, and the thing was dear to him. For the plaudits of the world he had never cared; but when he came to stand before his Maker, he wanted to carry at least one sheaf in his hands.

When it was finally given out that Johnny was going away to school, the interest in the neighborhood was great, and the news percolated through the forested glades and up the rough mountainsides with astonishing speed. On Johnny's last Sunday the little log church at Rabbit Grove—a kind of social clearing-house for the neighborhood—was packed from door to pulpit, chiefly with women; and a poor, bedraggled, slatternly lot they were, for the most part, with stiff, bent backs and breasts as shrunken as desert wells. Their men preferred to sprawl outside on the grass or sit in wagons under the windows, where they could chew or play mumblety-peg during the service.

Blueford had patiently submitted to the martyrdom of the white shirt and linen collar which Johnny had thought proper for the occasion (she herself wore a fine new gown, designed and largely made by Miss Holly). Moreover, he sat by her side, in spite of his notorious repugnance to a close room; and though Sugar Jeems Holden, as he was known from Wildcat to Bone Gap by reason of his sweet tooth, took advantage of the crowd to preach an hour and fifty minutes, Blueford, notwithstanding that he was fairly afloat from perspiration, refrained from slipping in a quid of tobacco until the last hymn was announced.

After the benediction, the real purpose of the gathering was executed. The mountain people filed by Johnny and her father, as solemnly as if they had been chief mourners at a funeral, shook the hand of each, murmured some kindly wish, and passed on. But after the fried chicken had been spread on the grass, and half a dozen boys sent scurrying over to the spring for water, this rigidity gave way to something more like human intercourse.

"So you're goin' to Marysville, Johnny," said Mrs. Daggett, a woman of cheerfulest mien than most of her sisters.

"You know maw went there—fur a little while. She says it's a lovely place. She's got a pieter of it to hum. I'd 'a' brung it this mawnin', but I 'lowed you wouldn't care pertic'ler to see it, seein' you're goin' so soon."

"I would, though," answered Johnny, promptly.

"Then I'll bring it around to-morrow or next day, if I kin git away," promised Mrs. Daggett, gratified. "Maw's so techy about the childern handlin' it—she's gittin' childish—but she won't care fur you to see it." Her rather comely face grew pensive. "I'd like to go to that school, if it was jest fur one day. I'd jest like to see it, so I could always think of it atterwards. Maw says she'll never fergit how it looks, and she's seventy-four now. She was only fourteen when she went there. She was married at sixteen. You ought to be so happy, Johnny."

Johnny, with a subtle light in her eyes, as if she were not telling how she felt, did not answer for a moment.

"You reckon I'll like it there?" she asked, inaudibly to her father.

"Why, child, you can't help likin' it."

"You reckon I'll find the people much stuck up?"

"Well, they're pretty fashionable, maw says," admitted Mrs. Daggett, punctiliously. "But I don't reckon none of 'em will take the shine off of *you*. You had more advantages than most girls, and your paw's got money. You're so pretty and plump, too. You never had to do much hard work."

The night before she left, Johnny was given what was practically a second farewell party. Yet this gathering, which took place in Blueford Haynes's store, was, like the former one, wholly spontaneous. Each individual came at his own suggestion and ostensibly only to buy a little bacon or tobacco or, as the case might be, a little whiskey. But he had put on a tie or a collar, or added a coat to his customary outfit, or perhaps brought his wife along. Sugar Jeems Holden himself appeared, though opposed to social gatherings, as a rule; and throughout the evening he occupied his favorite seat—a soap-box adjoining the barrel of brown sugar, into which he ever

and anon surreptitiously thrust a dirty lean hand. Miss Holly was also present, though this followed as a matter of course from her having taken tea with the Hayneses that evening.

Johnny, apparently suspecting that company might drop in, had put on a second of her new gowns. She was always beautiful, even in a calico slip; but to-night she was fairly dazzling. Her longer skirts added to her stature, so that she seemed magically to have exchanged girlhood for womanhood. She carried herself with a subtle air of coquetry. Her cheeks were flushed; her eyes glowed luminously, and her gay laughter now and then rippled out above the hum of conversation. Her conduct was equally a puzzle to Miss Holly and to her father, both of whom had every reason to believe that she dreaded her departure.

As for himself, Blueford felt more like crying than laughing; and as he paddled, in his carpet slippers, up and down the narrow treadway behind the counter, laying out a spool of thread, or a penny's worth of candy, or a couple of ounces of gunpowder, a deadly heaviness of heart settled over him. Breathing became difficult, his ears sang, his red handkerchief was in constant requisition for drying his dewy brow; and he secretly prayed, hospitable soul though he was, that the visitors would soon go. For just one thing was he thankful—Bud Turner had not shown up. He had begun to be afraid of Bud and to suspect that he had more to do with Johnny's reluctance to leave home than she would admit.

Miss Holly also noted Bud's absence. But she, on the contrary, was by no means reassured by the fact; and several times during the evening she thoughtfully studied Johnny's animated, half-reckless face. Miss Holly was not only shrewd, but she had this enterprise of Johnny's at heart; and when at last it was her turn to go—the others having already gone and Blueford standing outside to cool his brow—she put her arms around the girl's neck with a tenderness unexpected from so decorous and self-contained a person, and kissed her with misty eyes, and said:

"Johnny, I shall miss you, but I am so glad this opportunity is yours. It will mean so much to you—so much more



FOR SEVERAL MOMENTS SHE GAZED AT THE PICTURES

than you can now see. It will change the whole course of your life. It will reveal possibilities of which you don't dream now. And the day will come when you will go down on your knees and thank God for a father who could foresee all this, and who was unselfish enough to sacrifice himself—for I know how his heart bleeds—that his child might have a higher life. Don't waste your grand chance. Study hard. Be brave when discouragements come, and show that you are worthy of such a father."

The speaker's emotion and the throbbing solemnity of her voice seemed to strike Johnny like a douche of cold water. She caught her breath; the color died from her face; and the lips with which she returned her benefactor's kiss were

cold. For perhaps three minutes, while her father closed the front doors and made ready for the night, she stood there by the coffee-grinder like one dazed, or suddenly roused from a riotous dream. Then, with a quivering sigh that was close to a sob, she went to her room to finish her packing. Blueford, who could help most by keeping out of the way, sat to one side and watched her, with no appetite for his usual bedtime pipe. Slowly, listlessly, in striking contrast to her usual vigor, she folded her garments one by one. Blueford did not wish to see her sad, yet he liked her better in this mood than in the other. It accorded with his own.

When she paused and looked around, as if to see whether anything had been

forgotten, Blueford arose, with a "Wait a minute, baby," and walked heavily into his own room. He hauled from under his bed a little round-topped, old-fashioned trunk which he had not considered fine enough for the Marysville student, and from it took three daguerreotypes, richly bound in gold and leather.

"Baby," he began, faintly, with ominously trembling cheeks, "here's a picture of your grandpaw, and one of your uncle Carter, and one of your aunt Ellen. I thought I'd always keep 'em by me. I ain't got much else to remind me of—of what I used to be." His blue eyes filled. "But I want you to take 'em. I want you to keep before your eyes the kind of men you are descended from—the kind of men the women in our family before you have married. It will help you to decide, when the time comes, the kind of a man you ought to marry. And I want you to look at your aunt Ellen and see the kind of a woman you ought to be—and *will* be, thank God. For the way is now open. At school you will not only learn books, but you will learn to be a lady, a fit companion for a gentleman."

The girl received the pictures silently. For several moments she gazed at the aristocratic lineaments, set off by long hair and huge stocks. But there was something like defiance in her eyes.

"Daddy, I suppose I'll marry a gentleman, if I ever marry anybody," said she, finally. "But I want to tell you that I don't think they are the only kind, by a long shot, worthy of a good woman's love."

Blueford did not answer. When she employed that tone it was always better not to answer.

"Well, baby, let's go to bed. Give me your last—your last good-night kiss for many a long day."

But she laid her hands upon his great chest and withheld herself for a moment.

"Wait! Daddy—" She paused, with twitching throat.

"Yes, honey—don't cry."

"Daddy, I want you to know the truth. I—I love you fur all you are doin' fur me. But it's just a-breakin' my heart to go away, and I'm only doin' it because *you* want me to."

Sleep did not come to Blueford. He had hardly expected it. But neither had he expected that crushing sense of desola-

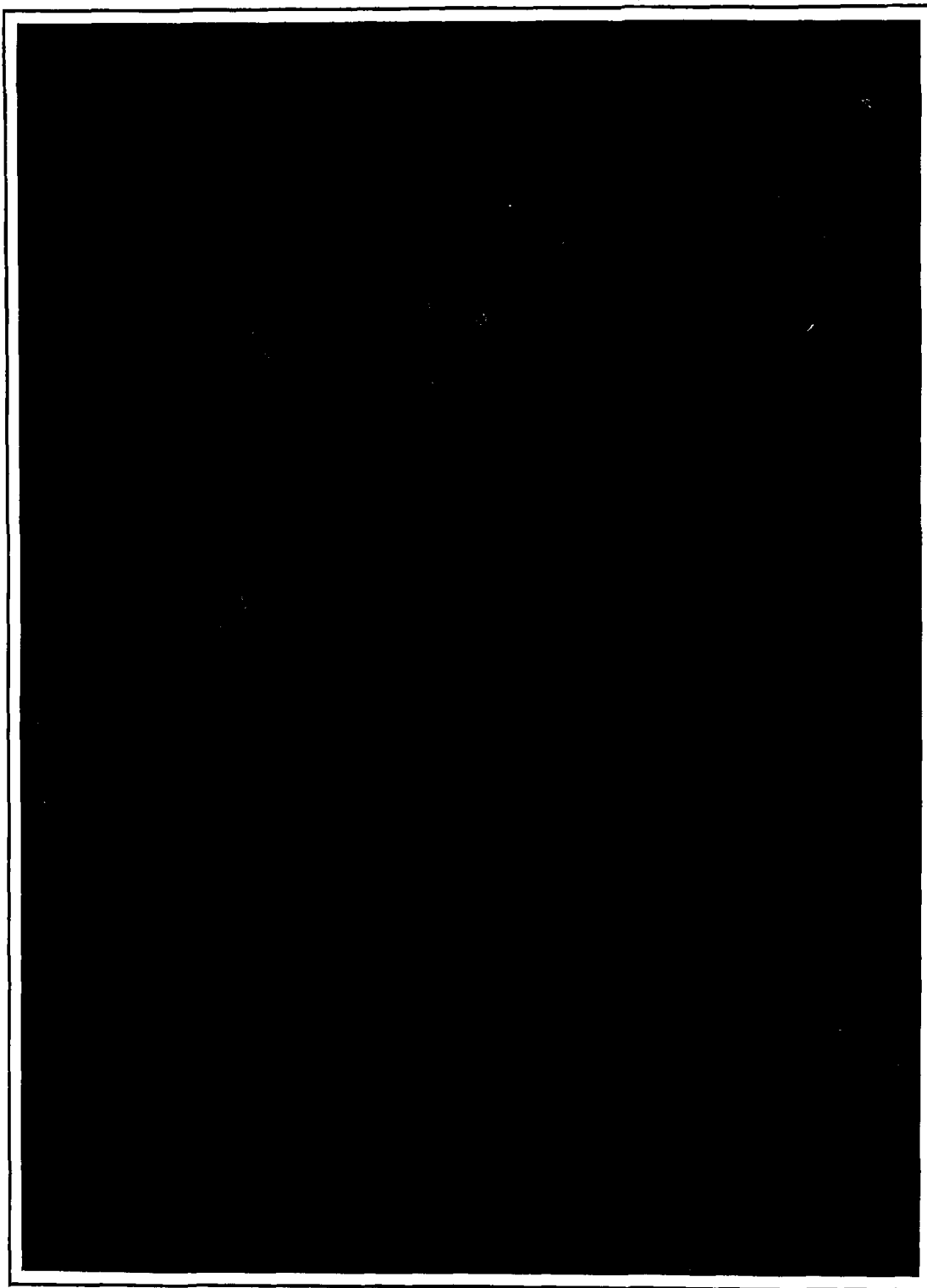
tion, that profound, benumbing loneliness which now crept over him like a paralysis. He had suffered more or less from hypochondria, induced, perhaps, by his excessive fat; and a panicky fear now seized him that he was going to die of a broken heart. His chamber became a place of torture; and after a little he arose, dressed, and slipped noiselessly down the dark, musty store, to fresh air outside.

He had scarcely walked ten consecutive rods in as many years; but now, to escape the phantoms which pursued him, he started, almost unconsciously, down the moonlit road. The pines rose solemnly and majestically to right and left, with shadowy Nigger Head in the distance. It was only the first week in September, but at this altitude the hardwood trees had already put on their autumnal garb, and the frost had silenced the singers of the night—the katydid and the snowy tree-cricket. Hence it was as still on the mountain, Blueford fancied, as it must have been on the first night of creation, before God had made a living thing to raise a song of love or bleat for its first-born.

Finally, though, he became conscious of a sound—a murmur which eventually resolved itself into hoof-beats, approaching at a rapid rate. Not wishing to expose himself unnecessarily, for rough characters sometimes rode abroad at night, he stepped into the roadside shrubbery and sat down on a boulder. In a short time there came into view two horses, one of which was riderless, though saddled and bridled; and they stopped not two rods from where Blueford sat.

The solitary horseman dismounted, tried his cinches, glanced at his watch, and then gazed long and fixedly down the road toward the store. But it was not until he had filled his pipe and lit it in the shelter of his horse's flank that the eavesdropper recognized him as Bud Turner—a metamorphosed Bud Turner, in his Sunday clothes and a new black hat, the latter worn, however, at the same swaggering angle as the old one that allowed his red hair to stick out at the top.

Blueford, as unsuspecting as a sucking dove, was just on the point of disclosing himself and asking Bud what kind of a lark he was on, when he chanced to notice that the led horse was



Drawn by Lucius Wolcott Hitchcock

" BUD, I CAN'T GO "

equipped with a side-saddle. Bud's straining down the road then took on some significance. Yet the idea of an elopement did not fully take possession of Blueford's mind until the object of Bud's solicitude hove into view.

Johnny did not come quickly, as a bride to her groom's embrace, but slowly, with her hands behind her back; and she wore only a simple white gown, with no hat—a costume at which the Lochinvar of the mountain gazed inquiringly.

"Bud, I can't go," said she, quietly, but with a hoarseness reminiscent of recent weeping.

"Can't go! Why can't you go?" he burst out, with the sudden fury of baffled love.

She did not answer at once, and Blueford, familiar with the fiery Turner blood, trembled for his daughter's safety.

"Bud, because it wouldn't be right. Because my daddy wants me to go away to school, and it will break his heart if I don't go. And because—because I think I ought to go."

"But you promised to marry me!" he answered, angrily.

"Bud, I do love you. And I meant to marry you. But something's come over me—less'n two hours ago. I'd rather have my back skinned than go to that school, and yet I want to go. I feel as if I'd be glad, sometime, that I did go. Miss Holly talked so solemn to me to-night, and daddy talked solemn too. I—I *can't* disappoint 'em. At first I thought I could. At first I thought I could laugh, when you and me got back from our honeymoon, about their makin' my trousseau when they thought they was gittin' me ready fur school. But I can't. They wouldn't laugh. They'd cry. And I'd cry, too. Bud, I can't explain. I don't understand it exactly myself. But, Buddy, you and me must part."

For a moment there was silence, broken only by the creaking of taut saddle-leather. Then Bud laid his head on his horse's withers and cried like the big boy that he really was. Johnny quietly came nearer.

"Buddy, I know it hurts. It hurts me, too. I love you, remember that, when I'm gone. And you can kiss me good-bye if you want to."

For a moment he looked at her face,

so fair, so pure and white in the moonlight. Then he shook his head.

"No, not that way," said he, mournfully.

She understood—for a true kiss is not charity, but a fair exchange—and leaning swiftly forward, she herself kissed him. The next moment she was a shadow down the road.

Father and daughter, with the trunk in the wagon, were on the road by four o'clock, for they had a fifteen-mile drive before them. Neither spoke of the tryst of the night before. Johnny was unconscious that her father knew anything about it, and he was content with what he knew. They reached the station an hour and a half ahead of the train, but the time hung heavily for neither of them. And when at last the whistle blew and the locomotive rounded a curve into view, Johnny tightly seized her father's hand and shook with fear for a moment.

"Be brave, daughter!" he whispered, hoarsely.

"I will, dad," she answered, through set lips.

"And don't—don't git homesick and come back."

"Dad, I'll stay, if I die." And he knew that she would.

As the train drew away, with a girl's white face pressed close to the window, old Blueford stood stock-still, with swimming head and unseeing eyes.

When the landscape cleared, almost the first object he saw was Bud Turner rising from behind a pile of ties. The father's heart suddenly went out to the lad—for did not he also love Johnny?

"Bud, this is a sad day fur me."

No answer.

"Bud, I reckon the store won't be the same old place no more."

Still no answer.

"Bud, I reckon the boys won't come around like they used to."

Then Bud's helplessly moving lips gave forth speech.

"I will, Mr. Haynes, if you'll let me. I jest want to set and look at that little willer rockin'-chair what you give her last year fur Christmas."

Blueford laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. It was the only answer he could make.